

Development and India: Why Genetically Modified Mustard Really Matters

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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The push to commercialise the growing of genetically modified (GM) mustard in India is currently held up in court due to a lawsuit by Aruna Rodrigues. The next hearing is due in February. Rodrigues has indicated at length that, to date, procedures and tests have been corrupted by fraudulent practices, conflicts of interests and gross regulatory delinquency.

Dr Deepak Pental, lead researcher into the crop at Delhi University, has now [conceded](#) that the GM mustard in question has not even been tested against varieties of non-GM mustard for better yields. That seems very strange given that the main argument for introducing GM mustard is to increase productivity in order to reduce edible oils imports (a [wholly bogus](#) argument in the first place).

All of this should in itself provide sufficient cause for concern and have alarm bells ringing. It raises the question: what then is the point of GM mustard?

Consider too that the drive to get India's first GM food crop into the field and on the market also goes against the recommendations of four high-level reports that have advised against the adoption of these crops in India: The 'Jairam Ramesh Report' of February 2010, imposing an indefinite moratorium on Bt Brinjal; The 'Sopory Committee Report' (August 2012); The 'Parliamentary Standing Committee' (PSC) Report on GM crops (August 2012); and The 'Technical Expert Committee (TEC) Final Report' (June-July 2013).

These reports conclude that GM crops are unsuitable for India and that existing proper biosafety and regulatory procedures are inadequate. Appointed by the Supreme Court, the TEC was scathing about the regulatory system prevailing in India, highlighting its inadequacies and inherent serious conflicts of interest. The TEC recommended a 10-year moratorium on commercial release of GM crops. The PSC also arrived at similar conclusions.

It might seem perplexing that the current Modi-led administration seems to be accelerating the drive for GM given that the BJP manifesto [stated](#): "GM foods will not be allowed without full scientific evaluation on the long-term effects on soil, production and biological impact on consumers." Yet none of this has occurred.

[According to eminent lawyer Prashant Bhushan](#), these official reports attest to just how negligent and unconcerned India's regulators are with regard to the risks of GMO contamination. They also attest to a serious lack of expertise on GM issues within official circles. It is now clear that placing GM crops on the commercial market in the first place (in the US) was based on the [subversion or bypassing of science](#) and that their introduction poses a [risk to food security](#), [human health](#) and [animal, plants and soil as well as the](#)

[environment](#) in general.

In India, the only commercialised GM crop (bt cotton) is a [failing technology](#) that has [severely impacted](#) farmers' livelihoods.

As bad as all of this might seem, the real significance of GM mustard lies in the fact it could be India's first GM food crop. In this sense, it should be regarded as a pioneering crop that would open the doors to a [range of other GM food crops](#) that are currently in the pipeline for testing.

GM provides a handful of companies with an ideal tool for securing intellectual property rights over seeds (and chemical inputs) and thus gaining corporate control over farming and agriculture. Despite the GMO industry saying that GM should be but one method within a mix, evidence indicates that this is impractical due to [cross-contamination](#) and that corporations and their mouthpieces are seeking to [denigrate/replace](#) existing food production practices in order to secure greater control over global agriculture. In effect, the only reason for imposing GM crops on India seems to be to facilitate [corporate imperialism](#).

The issue of GM mustard is not only about a crop but is central to a development paradigm that wants to see a fully urbanised India with a small fraction of people left in agriculture and living in the countryside. US companies and Washington, via the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture, are driving the agenda. Does India want to mirror what is effectively a [disastrous US model](#) of agriculture? If this is the case, it is highly disturbing, given that it is an unsustainable taxpayer-subsidised sector that has produced a range of social, environmental and health costs outlined in that last link.

We must therefore ask: does India want denutritified food, increasingly monolithic diets, the massive use of agrochemicals, food contaminated by hormones, steroids, antibiotics and a wide range of chemical additives, spiralling rates of ill health, degraded soil, contaminated and depleted water supplies and a cartel of seed, chemicals and food processing companies that seek to secure control over the global food production and supply chain to provide people with low-grade but highly profitable food products?

Things do not look good. A recent [UN report](#) said that by 2030, Delhi's population will be 37 million. In 1991, it was just over 9.4 million. Such rapid, ongoing urbanisation will eat up highly productive farmland on the edges of cities and will place smallholder farmers under even more duress. Quoted in The Guardian, the report's principal authors, Felix Creutzig, says:

The emerging mega-cities will rely increasingly on industrial-scale agricultural and supermarket chains, crowding out local food chains.

In India, the push to drive at least 400 million from the land and into cities is [already underway](#) at the behest of the World Bank: a World Bank that is, under the guise of 'enabling the business of agriculture', committed to opening up economies to corporate seeds and agrochemicals and securing global supply chains for transnational agribusiness from field to plate.

The drive is to entrench industrial farming, commercialise the countryside and to replace small-scale farming: small-scale farming that is the backbone of food production in India

(and globally) and which is [more productive](#) than industrialised agriculture, more sustainable and capable of producing more diverse, nutrient- dense diets. Contrast this with what Green Revolution technologies and ideology [has already done](#) to India, including the degradation of its water, its soils and its people's health (see [this](#) and [this](#)).

Contrast it with an industrial farming that would bring with it all the problems outlined above. And an industrial farming that would destroy hundreds of millions of livelihoods with little guarantee of work for those whose productive system is to be displaced by that which is to be imposed by the likes of Cargill, Monsanto/Bayer and other corporate entities that fuel industrial agriculture.

The issue of GM mustard is part of a drive that seeks to restructure India to benefit foreign capital; a process that regards as being India ripe for a [30-trillion-dollar corporate hijack](#).

Food and trade policy analyst [Devinder Sharma](#) describes the situation:

India is on fast track to bring agriculture under corporate control... Amending the existing laws on land acquisition, water resources, seed, fertilizer, pesticides and food processing, the government is in overdrive to usher in contract farming and encourage organized retail. This is exactly as per the advice of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as well as the international financial institutes.

Dr Pental's GM mustard has roots that trace its origins [back to Bayer](#). Mr Modi, Arvind Subramanian (Chief Economic Advisor to the Indian government) and former governor of the Reserve Bank of India Raghuram Rajan also have roots that [can be traced back](#) to Washington, the IMF and the World Bank.

There is an agenda for India. An agenda that regards the peasantry, small farms and India's rural-based traditions, cultures and village-level systems of food production/processing as backward, as an impediment to 'progress'. An agenda that regards [alternative approaches](#) to agriculture that have been advocated by numerous high-level reports as a hindrance: approaches that would in effect build on and develop the current rural infrastructure and not eradicate it.

There is a push to displace the current productive system with a corporate-controlled model geared towards the maximisation of profit and the erosion of existing [deeply-embedded and culturally relevant](#) social relations. For all the fraud and corruption surrounding GM mustard, this alone should convince any bystanders to question the ongoing drive - against all the recommendations - to introduce GM food crops to India.

Finally, none of this is about being 'anti-GMO'. It is about understanding and challenging the politics of GM and development. Wealthy corporations are flexing their financial and political muscle and are effectively hijacking public institutions for their own ends by slanting, science, politics, policies and regulation (these claims are discussed [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) . It should not be about whether we are pro-GMO or anti-GMO. It is more the case of whether we are anti-corruption and pro-democratic.

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